



Testimony by Pamela R Edington, Provost and Dean of Academic Affairs  
Norwalk Community College  
Before the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee  
Tuesday, September 25, 2012

Good afternoon Senator Fonfara, Representative Rowe, Senator Kissel, Representative Mushinsky and members of the Legislative Program Review and Investigations (PRI) Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments for your consideration on the topic of public higher education involvement in state urban issues.

By way of introduction, Norwalk Community College (NCC) serves ten communities in southwest Fairfield County, including Stamford, Norwalk, and Greenwich, the fourth, sixth and ninth largest cities in Connecticut. Although NCC is located in the geographic area referred to as Connecticut's Gold Coast, the major urban areas in our service region are not immune to the challenges of poverty, homelessness, and crime, which are of primary interest to this Legislative Committee.

Our fall enrollment is at an all-time high of 6,940 credit students. Recently designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution, NCC is a racially and ethnically diverse college with more than 54% of our students self-reporting as non-white.

The mission of Norwalk Community College is to be a leader and partner in the academic, economic and cultural lives of our communities, providing comprehensive, accessible, innovative and affordable learning opportunities to diverse populations.

Since his arrival in 2004, NCC President Dr. David Levinson has made community engagement an institutional priority and has consistently promoted community partnerships as a cornerstone of his administration. In 2010, NCC identified community engagement as one of five core values to guide the development of the 2011-16 Strategic Plan. Expanding and leveraging community partnerships and strategic alliances is one of our six strategic plan goals.

In sum, Norwalk Community College takes its middle name of community very seriously and enthusiastically supports legislative interest and assistance in promoting, expanding, and sustaining public higher education involvement in state urban issues.

In my 27 plus years of experience as a faculty member and senior administrator in community colleges, I have found that the most successful methods of preparing our graduates for life-long learning, productive work, and civic engagement are through incorporating community engagement into the academic experiences of college students. I am sharing with you today several examples of community engagement we are implementing at Norwalk Community College that we have found to be especially effective in implementing the college mission of helping to meet community needs.

As the chief academic officer, an early priority for me in Connecticut was to initiate a service learning program at Norwalk Community College. From a single faculty member working with

one community partner in 2006, service learning<sup>1</sup> at NCC has expanded to 24 faculty, 39 courses, and 52 community agencies. Since 2007, more than 1,250 Norwalk Community College students have contributed over 25,000 hours to community agencies assisting them with outreach and direct service to children, seniors, and families. NCC students provide service in food programs, schools, community centers, and civic organizations.

An outstanding service learning example at NCC is the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA) sponsored by the Internal Revenue Service and the Connecticut Association for Human Services. For the past three years, NCC Accounting students enrolled in federal income tax classes who pass IRS certification exams and receive special IRS training have worked under the supervision of an NCC Accounting professor to prepare and file federal and state tax returns for low-income families every Saturday from early February through April 15<sup>th</sup>. Over the past three years, 3,857 student and faculty volunteer hours resulted in 656 federal and state returns being filed, for total refunds of \$544,829 and an additional \$238,294 in tax credits.

According to NCC Professor of Accounting Tony Scott, "It is one thing to sit in a classroom and learn about Earned Income Tax Credits, Child Tax Credits and Education Credits, and yet another to first sit down with a single parent who almost always is the mother of at least one child and who tells them about their pain and struggle in trying to make economic ends meet and desperately needs the money the student is in control of while preparing their return. When the student gets that, a transformation takes place. Then they come to me with questions about how to better help their clients. Yes, I was receiving emails after Saturday with a subject line of 'My Client.' They owned the returns they were preparing. It was not something mechanical being done to achieve a better grade. It was a desire to do the best that they could for 'My client.' This is truly amazing."

A second example of community partnerships at NCC involves a local non-profit agency that was struggling to identify suitable space for an afterschool program for low-income and at-risk middle school students. We helped the agency to locate the program at the college, and integrated service-learning students as homework tutors and role models. More than 50% of the middle school students have increased their GPA and close to 75% of them have shown improvement in their homework. This fall a student who had been introduced to NCC as a middle school student is now enrolled as a college freshman. The United Bank of Scotland (UBS) provided early funding to support this community partnership that has received national recognition from the League of Innovation and the American Council of Education.

A third example of our community partnerships is the NCC Family Economic Security Program (FESP). Modeled after the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Center for Working Families, the FESP program at NCC was designed to address the needs of students with dependents who struggle to achieve economic security for their families while juggling the roles of student, parent, caretaker, and employee. With the generous support of the Fairfield County Community Foundation and the Norwalk Community College Foundation, the FESP program assists working parents at NCC to complete their associate and baccalaureate degrees with scholarships and living stipends, along with individualized achievement coaching provided by the Fairfield County Women's Center and

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<sup>1</sup> The National Service Learning Clearing House (<http://www.servicelearning.org/>) defines *service learning as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.*

financial coaching provided by the Women's Business Development Center. The Bank of America is also providing funds to assist with job placement and career advancement. The Family Economic Security Program is setting a national example of how community colleges can design and implement effective economic security programs in collaboration with community partners. At an upcoming national meeting of the Centers for Working Families, NCC will be honored with a sustaining innovation award for this work by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Finally, an example of a comprehensive community based initiative is one we are collaborating on with a large number of public and private agencies in the city of Norwalk. In 2010 the Norwalk Housing Authority was awarded a Choice Neighborhoods Initiative (CNI) Planning Grant for Washington Village/South Norwalk by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The goal of the CNI is to assist communities with the development of "Transformation Plans" for targeted distressed housing and their neighborhoods to create economically and socially diverse, healthy, and vibrant mixed-income communities. NCC President Dr. David Levinson chairs the Transformation Committee of the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative and I am a member of the People's Task Force Committee and the Education Subcommittee. The college is considered one of the anchor institutions pivotal to the successful transformation of a critical neighborhood within Norwalk. In addition to playing a leadership role in fostering city-wide collaboration, the college will also provide lifelong education programs and workforce development for the neighborhood.

These and other community-based projects and partnerships at Norwalk Community College are a primary reason NCC was the first Connecticut community college selected to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll in 2009, and one of only two Connecticut community colleges listed on the 2012 Honor Roll.

(<http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/initiatives/honorroll.asp>)

Norwalk Community College is also one of only six community colleges in the nation to be recognized with the Carnegie Elective Classification of Community Engagement in 2010 and one of only 17 public community colleges to earn the classification since 2006.

[http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/descriptions/community\\_engagement.php](http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/descriptions/community_engagement.php)

One of the resources especially helpful to us in creating sustainable partnerships with the community is Campus Compact. Campus Compact is a nationwide coalition of 1,200 college and university presidents committed to fulfilling the civic purposes of higher education.

(<http://www.compact.org/>) NCC President David Levinson and I are both members of the Board of Directors of the Connecticut Campus Compact, which currently boasts membership of every public institution of higher education, including the 12 community colleges, the four state universities, and the University of Connecticut. (<http://blog.fairfield.edu/campuscompact/>) Both the national Campus Compact and our state of Connecticut Campus Compact have a reservoir of examples, best practices, and effective assessments of campus-based community engagement.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address the Program Review and Investigations Committee on the topic of public higher education involvement in state urban issues. I am confident that you will find that there is already a great deal of community activity on Connecticut college and university campuses and a strong interest in working with the state legislature to expand higher education involvement in meeting pressing community needs.

